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Dissent under fire

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THE U.S.-LED war on Iraq has been accompanied by assaults on free speech in the homeland. The attempt to label anyone who disagrees with the war as "unpatriotic" is predictable, but no less disturbing.

We are not talking about the condemnation of the anarchy in downtown San Francisco this week. We add our voice to the denouncement of some demonstrators' disruptive, destructive tactics. Their antics -- in the naive belief that they could stop the war by forcing a city that is struggling to maintain social services to spend an extra \$500,000 a day to deal with civil disobedience -- has alienated many San Franciscans.

SFPD officers should be commended for showing the right blend of resolve and restraint, especially in the face of Thursday's relentless provocations.

Those demonstrators played right into the hands of those who are eager to mock and marginalize the peace movement.

But the exploitation of the war by hawkish ideologues is equally unseemly. House Republican leaders could not resist the chance to tweak the many Americans with principled reservations about the war by crafting a resolution that expressed "unequivocal support and appreciation" for President Bush's leadership in attacking Iraq as "part of the ongoing global war on terrorism."

Most House Democrats -- even those who rightly worried that a pre-emptive war would inflame the world and raise the danger of terrorism -- swallowed hard at the loaded language and voted "yes." But 11 members bravely voted "no," including Barbara Lee of Oakland, Mike Honda of San Jose and Pete Stark of Fremont. Each has made a point of expressing support and concern for the troops, though Stark added his usual boorish touch by suggesting President Bush launched the war to enrich his friends and "cover the fact that he didn't catch bin Laden."

To their credit, U.S. Senate Republicans did not try to politicize the moment. Their straightforward support-the-troops resolution passed 99-0, and properly so.

Among the "yes" votes was Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle, who had received an avalanche of criticism for stating the obvious: that Bush had "failed miserably" in diplomatic efforts to avoid war. House Speaker Dennis Hastert even suggested, absurdly, that Daschle's comments came "mighty close" to giving comfort to America's enemies.

In the California Assembly, Republicans this week cooked up a resolution offering the Legislature's "unqualified support of our commander-in-chief George W. Bush" -- a clear attempt to embarrass the 51 Senate and Assembly Democrats who had signed a letter against the war before hostilities began.

This is an unsettling time for many Americans, no matter how promising the assessment of the initial

strike at Saddam Hussein or the "shock and awe" barrage that rocked Iraq Friday. An act of aggression in the pretext of self- defense will weaken this country's moral authority in trying to restrain other countries who want to hit an enemy first. It was a slap at our allies and a gift to the Osama bin Ladens of the world who want to portray us as imperialists, or worse.

Americans who support the war should be respectful of those who speak against it with deeply held convictions. Opponents of war, for their part, should recognize the foolishness of trying to use vandalism and intimidation to protest the use of military force.

We share the president's bottom-line goal of disarming and ousting Hussein's rogue regime -- and believed, with the world united and resolved to contain him, it could have been accomplished without the loss of life and the daunting long-term risks and obligations this war will produce.

Once the fighting began, however, the diplomatic option vanished. We support the troops and their mission. We want the war to end quickly -- and decisively -- with as few casualties as possible.

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